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Amanda Ewolt

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THE GREAT GAMES WE FAN PLAY RESISTANCE AND THE BBC SHERLOCK

by Amanda
Ewoldt

Popular culture has always been rife with conflict between text producers and text consumers. The producers create "authorized" versions of a text, and the consumers do their best to engage with that text while, at the same time, attempting to subvert it. Normal subversion tactics revolve around what Henry Jenkins calls "textual poaching" or the creation of fanfiction, fan art, and even fan videos. These tactics, once taboo, are increasingly out in the open; sites like fanfiction.net and archiveofourown.org contain huge archives of multimedia fanfiction, host numerous fandoms, and are well-trafficked sites. Deviantart.com is a popular forum to post not only original artwork online, but also fan art. YouTube is home to thousands of fan-made videos revolving around favorite shows and characters.

Discontented with mainstream value systems, the *Sherlock* fandom is tireless in implementing various forms of resistance to question the balance of power and authority between producer, consumer, and text. One such method is slash fanfiction,¹ which is both a tool for

1. Slash is a genre of fanfiction that places emphasis on (typically) male homo-romantic and homoerotic relationships. Lesbian romantic/erotic relationships are usually labeled as fem-slash, but the two categories are essentially the same. A very popular and enduring slash "ship" (short for "relationship") everyone would recognize is Kirk/Spock from *Star Trek*.

understanding and creating meaning from the source text and an act of defiance from those who feel marginalized by the dominant culture. Yet, I argue, *Sherlock* is a special case. *Sherlock* itself is a brilliant and intertextual rereading of Arthur Conan Doyle's original text; in other words, the show itself is elaborate fanfiction, which complicates the typical producer-fandom interaction and undermines typical subversion tactics.

Although the stigma attached to these kinds of fan productions has lessened over the years, by no means has it disappeared. Fan productions are grudgingly accepted by producers as part of the unavoidable negotiation of power between authorized producer and the consumer: "In the formulation of fan culture that emerged in the wake of *Textual Poachers* fans were seen as rebels. Fandom was thought of as essentially different from—and frequently opposed to— 'official' media production."² Fans constantly appropriate texts for their own purposes, appropriations that are later negated by the release of authorized installments of texts. In a sense, the producers and consumers play an ideological game of hot potato.

According to John Fiske, "the key differences between [fan productions and official productions] are economic rather than ones of competence, for fans do not write or produce their texts for money ... there is also a difference in circulation; because fan texts are not produced for profit, they do not need to be mass-marketed, so unlike official culture, fan culture makes no attempt to circulate its texts outside of its own community."³ Fan productions exist outside or on the fringes of mainstream culture. Fanfiction and other fan productions are not meant for a broad, mainstream public dissemination, but rather tend to be kept inside the fandom where the references, in-jokes, and politics are best understood. In writing about fan privacy, Busse and Hellekson say something similar: "Fan publications ... are perceived as existing in a

2. Mark Duffett, *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 73.

3. John Fiske, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom," *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media* (London: Routledge, 1992), 39.

closed, private space even though they may be publicly available."⁴ Even though most fans use pseudonyms to post their work, the overall assumption is that only those who are fans of the source texts, who are like-minded in worldview and textual experience, and who actively seek out fandom engagement will be interested in viewing the fan works.

Fiske believes that active fan participation is crucial to creating more cultural capital in fandom.⁵ In the Sherlockian fandom, a fan who has read the original stories by Conan Doyle has more cultural capital than someone who has only seen the BBC version; in order to successfully play the game of "motif spotting," one must know the original source texts. Thus, fandom cultural capital has limits; the fan knowledge and experience only contains meaning inside the fandom.⁶

Slash fanfiction and fan art, in various stages of graphic detail, has been the poster child of fan subversion for decades:

When we think of such subversive fan work (and play) today, however, we're usually thinking about reading ostensibly straight narratives with a queer lens, and more specifically, slash fiction ... fan writing in general, and perhaps slash in particular, is a postmodern project: it challenges the domination of the author over the text with an overwhelming plurality of signs, readings, and potentially subversive queer interpretations.⁷

4. Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson, "Identity, Ethics, and Fan Privacy," *Fan Culture: Theory/Practice* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Pub, 2012), 39.

5. John Fiske, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom," *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media* (London: Routledge, 1992), 42. The concept of cultural capital essentially means knowledge = power. The more you know and have experienced in a certain subject, the more authority you have.

6. Mark Duffett, *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 132.

7. Balaka Basu, "Sherlock and the (Re)Invention of Modernity," *Sherlock and Transmedia Fandom: Essays on the BBC Series*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 208.

Studies on advertising tell us that sex sells; in *Sherlock*, it seems vague, malleable sexuality sells even more. Further, although fan writing and works of art "are often seen by non-fans as juvenile or thoroughly imitative, rather than as works to be viewed in their own right,"⁸ Catherine Coker argues against the idea that fan works are merely imitations of the original and thus have little inherent worth by pointing out the long tradition of literary imitations in Western literature.⁹ Imitation of the source text does not matter: a new and interesting reading of the text does.

Sex, Slash, and Sherlock

The producers of *Sherlock*, Stephen Moffat and Mark Gattiss,¹⁰ are self-described lifelong fanboys of the Great Detective and present themselves as such: "the creators portray themselves less as official authors of the series than as fan authors ... who are fascinated by Sherlock."¹¹ As with any folk group, there is a hierarchy, and Sherlock's production team is in a unique position of being *both* authorized producers and active participants in the fandom/folk group. *Sherlock* is at once a love letter to the original stories/characters, and a shiny 21st Century fanfiction of the traditional canon, rich in references to the source texts. At the very least, the lines between producer and audience are blurrier than they would ordinarily be.

8. Catherine Coker, "The Angry!TextualPoacher!IsAngry! Fan Works as Political Statements." *Fan Culture: Theory/Practice* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Pub, 2012), 81.

9. Coker, 82.

10. Note: They are colloquially/affectionately known in the fandom community by an amalgamation of their last names, Mofftiss, a practice usually reserved for ship-names of favorite character romantic pairings.

11. Ellen Burton Harrington, "Terror, Nostalgia, and the Pursuit of Sherlock Holmes in *Sherlock*." *Sherlock and Transmedia Fandom: Essays on the BBC Series*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 72.

Beyond merely being a popular show with a devoted fanbase, *Sherlock* presents an irresistible challenge to fan writers: the character himself is ambiguous on many levels, sexuality being one of the most pondered topics. *Sherlock* not only poses the question of his orientation, both in the insinuations of other characters and in a direct conversation between John Watson and Sherlock Holmes (over a candlelit dinner in an Italian restaurant, no less) but then refuses to answer it:

JW: You don't have a girlfriend then?
SH: Girlfriend? No, not really my area.
JW: Oh. Right then. Do you have a
boyfriend? Which is fine by the way—
SH: I know it's fine.
JW: So, you've got a boyfriend?
SH: No.
JW: Right, okay. You're unattached, just like me.
Fine. Good.
SH: (awkwardly) John, um...I think you should know
that I consider myself married to my work, and
while I am flattered by your interest I'm—
JW: No—
SH: —really not looking for anyone—
JW: No, I'm not asking—no. I was just saying. It's
all fine.
SH: Good. Thank you.

Not answering the question definitively was tantamount to giving the fandom permission to go wild with speculation, and it most certainly did. Slash writers rallied around the assumption that if Sherlock Holmes, the world's only consulting detective extraordinaire, thinks someone is hitting on him, he is right. The show plays with the idea of Sherlock's sexuality without committing to any particular sexual identity. "A Scandal in Belgravia" is the second time his sexual preference is directly addressed, again, inconclusively.

Subversion...Endorsed?

Yet, the producers have laid a trap for the fandom and we have blundered into it. Knowing how fandom works, the show-runners create tantalizing ambiguity. Perhaps fans are not being truly resistant in writing slash

fanfiction. Instead, they are being deliberately manipulated into active engagement. The production team is acutely aware of fan-made works and seem to bear them with varying degrees of support or even encouragement. Slash might still have shock value to the uninitiated, but the show and production team undercuts the subversive nature of slash by acknowledging and even encouraging it.

In an interview with MTV News, Benedict Cumberbatch describes being introduced to the slash world by co-star Martin Freeman. He found it startling, but diplomatically admits "I was amazed at the level of artistry—even the really dirty ones."¹² If Cumberbatch remains poised during questions of fan-work, Martin Freeman, appearing on a special hosted by British talk show host Graham Norton, stays equally unflustered. Norton gleefully shows his guest and audience several slash fan artworks, each one more graphic than the preceding image. The last one is too graphic for Norton to show on television while the camera is rolling, although Freeman recognizes it, giggles and says "I know it. I've seen it. There are a lot of people out there who think we're [John and Sherlock] going at it. Yeah, lots of people."¹³ This acknowledgement of fan work comes from even higher authorities than the lead actors. During a panel discussion at a recent fan convention, show-runner Stephen Moffat supports fan works:

I think fan fiction, or as it should be called, 'Fiction', is a wonderful thing and a brilliant way to start and continue writing, because it's not self indulgent in any way. Oddly enough, it's the opposite of self-indulgent. You're writing this, generally speaking, fan fiction for other people. You're trying to to entertain someone. You're actively engaging in the business of storytelling. You will learn more from writing fan fiction or doing fan art, any of those things; you will learn more from doing that well, than you will from any writing course you go

12. "Benedict Cumberbatch Says 'Sherlock' Fan Fiction is 'Flattering'." *YouTube*, 2 May 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2r8rQbWq_zU

13. Martin Freeman Discusses Series 3 of Sherlock and Fanart." *YouTube*, 9 Mar. 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pIISEOMYg5U>

on. Because writing fiction of that kind is the job. It's not like the job; it IS the job.¹⁴

If slash is supposed to be unauthorized and subversive, the reactions from cast and crew are interesting. Moffat's enthusiasm, Freeman's apparent amusement, and Cumberbatch's careful admiration of it--or, at least of the time and energy fans put into creating it--politely defangs slash fiction as an unsurprising and oddly flattering game they play with the fandom.

Such an attitude makes sense, however, when looking at *Sherlock* as a whole. The show itself is a subversive fanfiction of Conan Doyle's original work. Blending a number of influences, from the original source texts to Sherlockian filmography, including *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* (1970)¹⁵ which featured a gay Holmes in love with an oblivious Watson,



Sherlock is a masterpiece of fan work. It follows then, that all fanfiction written about the show (slash or otherwise) is actually meta-fanfiction about a fanfiction. The only difference between Moffat and Gatiss and the rest of the fan-authors is they have the cultural and financial capital to make their subversive fanfiction an official production, which is then recovered as subversive by subsequent fan work. Thus, nothing about *Sherlock* fanfiction, not even the slash fiction, is actually subversive, because the idea has been deliberately planted. And, in the words of the Consulting Detective himself, you can't kill an idea.¹⁶

14. "Sherlocked: Steven Moffat Talks Fan Art and Fan Fiction." *Sherlockology*, 3 June 2015. Web. 29 July 2015. <http://www.sherlockology.com/news/2015/6/3/steven-moffat-fan-fiction-030615>

15. Michael Leader, "Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss Interview: Sherlock." *Den of Geek*, 20 July 2010. Web. 29 July 2015. <http://www.denofgeek.us/tv/sherlock/20536/steven-moffat-and-mark-gatiss-interview-sherlock>

16. "The Reichenbach Fall." *Sherlock*. Written by Steven Thompson. England: BBC and PBS Masterpiece, 2012. DVD, 90 min.